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ABSTRACT

Learning centers should be considered a fundamental strategy in the instruction of language skills, functioning more in the mainstream of the language arts curriculum than on the periphery. In view of the fact that language is founded on thought that is derived from the learner's experience, learning centers provide a language experience approach, featuring the use of the learner's own language and thought as a foundation for instruction. In learning centers children are taught real uses of real language, not given dry-run drills. The use of learning centers also affects the role of the teacher, who assumes the position of guide and co-learner rather than that of source and dispenser of knowledge. The teacher circulates among the centers, sits in on discussions, reads written work, and gives editorial help. Teachers discover that such a classroom setting allows them more freedom with their classroom time. (JF)

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Learning Centers in the Classroom: Frills or Fundamentals?

"I finished all the workbook pages you assigned," says Amy to her third-grade teacher, "and I wanted to know what I should do now. It's almost an hour until recess." After looking briefly at her workbook to see that all the required work had been done, the teacher answers, "How about working in the poetry center until recess? You'll have enough time to write a nice poem, and you've really earned a treat like that." Amy does produce a poem, which she asks to take home to show her family. After recess, she is given more workbook pages to do.

Meanwhile, as the fourth-graders return from the lunchroom, their teacher greets them with some good news. "You've all worked really hard this week, and so this afternoon we're going to do learning centers." Faces brighten, eyes light up, and the teacher continues.

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"We've set up quite a few centers while you were at lunch, and I'm sure you can find one that interests you. So look them over and choose one to start on." In a few minutes, while the children are busily engaged in writing plays, reading folktales, and inventing story endings, the teacher turns to the aide and says, "You know, I wish they'd be just half this enthusiastic about their skill work. But I guess these centers at least help keep them interested enough to do the other things."

These brief scenes illustrate a common approach to the use of learning centers in language arts classrooms. Used as rewards for completing required work, and as "fun" activities to "motivate" children to do other kinds of tasks, they are not considered to be vital contributors to learning. In a time when proponents of the "back-to-basics" movement are demanding an even greater emphasis upon drill-and-exercise instruction, learning centers may well be shunted aside completely as unnecessary frills which interfere with the real business of learning.

This paper will contend, however, that the use of learning centers, as an elaboration of the concept of language experience, is a fundamental strategy for the enhancement of children's abilities as language users which should be more in the mainstream of the language arts curriculum than on the periphery.

Language is founded upon thought (Smith, 1975) derived from the learner's experience, and it develops through use. Language is acquired naturally (i.e., without formal instruction) and rapidly as

children are exposed to and operate upon language in their environment. (Slobin, 1971; Malmstrom, 1977) And it should be emphasized that the language they encounter is neither fragmented nor stilted, but whole and natural. People do not speak or write to children in phonemes, syllables, or even words, but in sentences and longer discourses; nor do they adopt an artificial "See spot run" style in interacting with the young. And although adults do use more complex patterns among their peers, children in our society are constantly exposed to these patterns also.

Goodman and Goodman (1976) have said that language develops because children need to understand and to be understood in order to survive and participate in the affairs of their families, communities, and societies. The functional value of language for children was demonstrated by Holliday (1975), who identified seven related functions in early speech and hypothesized that the awareness of such functions leads to the eventual mastery of language forms.

Language is seen as useful, and children begin to use it, formulating, testing, and revising their hypothesis of how language works. And Harste (1978) has reported initial research findings which indicate that the same process also underlies the development of written language. These insights suggest that learning activities in the language arts classroom should be rooted in the experiences of children, and should involve the functional use of whole, natural language.

Accordingly, Hall and Ramig (1976) have pointed out that the

language-experience approach, featuring the use of the learner's own language and thought as a foundation for instruction (Hall, 1976), has the strongest linguistic rationale among the various approaches for teaching reading, and Braun and Froese (1977) have urged extending this approach to all areas of language development.

Figure 1
Learning Centers

Where Do You Live? #1

Materials:
1. Map of the school neighborhood.
2. Art materials for making models of homes.

Learner directions:
1. Make a small model of your home. (Teacher note: A teacher-made example of a model home, complete with name and address, would give students a visible guide for completing this task.)
2. Put your name and address on your model.
3. Glue your model on the map where it belongs.

Where Do You Live? #2

Materials:
1. Box containing each child's name on a piece of paper.
2. Dittoed maps of the neighborhood.
3. Map from #1, above.

Learner directions:
1. Draw a name from the box.
2. Find that person's home on the big map.
3. Draw that person's home on your map.
4. Draw lines on your map that show that person how to get home from school.
5. Write directions which tell that person how to get home from school.
6. Show your directions to that person and ask if s/he goes home the same way.

(the author is indebted to Lynn Rhodes for the centers above)

What are these?

Materials:
1. List of sentences, each including a nonword, printed on a sheet of paper.
2. Writing materials.
3. Box to hold finished stories.

Learner directions:
1. Choose one sentence from the list and use it to start a story.
2. Write your story so that someone who reads it can guess what the nonword means.
3. Show your story to someone and see if that person can guess. If not, you may need to work on your story more.
4. When you are finished, put your story in the box.

Teacher notes: Stories can be bound into a book for the classroom library. Also, students can supply some of the sentences for the list.

Learning centers represent a natural way of implementing a language-experience approach. The examples shown in Figure 1 illustrate that centers can operationalize the concept of functional language use as the basis for language development. Learners can readily see that these are not "dry-run" drills, but real uses of real language; such an awareness is the energizing force behind real growth in language fluency. Further, the centers above capitalize upon children's experiences as the basis for language use. Children working in such centers are in the exciting position of having something to say, rather than in the distressing circumstances of "having to say something".

In addition, learning centers enable the teacher to effectively integrate the language arts. In any given center, all four language processes - reading, listening, speaking and writing - may be involved.

And these four processes, which are all realizations of the abstract concept "Language" (Harste and Burke, 1976), reinforce each other as they are used.

Centers like "Where Do You Live" suggest ways of integrating language arts with other areas of the total curriculum. In this center, the learner draws upon map-making abilities developed the social studies; other centers can involve the use of concepts from various curriculum areas.

Much can be done to enhance language development by providing a classroom setting where most student work is done in learning centers. However, more is involved than simply rearranging the furniture. The role of the teacher in such a classroom differs substantially. Circulating among the centers, sitting in on discussions (or getting them started), reading written work and giving editorial help, and other such activities require the teacher to assume the role of guide and co-learner, rather than that of source and dispenser of knowledge. Such a shift in role is accompanied by a number of advantages, not the least of which is a palpable lessening of the tension caused by being "in the limelight". To be the center of attention all day long in a classroom is taxing, and produces anxieties which can interfere in teacher-learner relationships. Another advantage likely to be noticed is that as the teacher moves from center to center, observation and informal assessment of student learning is more efficiently accomplished. Much instructional planning, for things like follow-up centers and the materials for them, can also be done during such observation. Further,

the teacher is able to better insure that students have access to needed materials and resources which may be located both in and out of the classroom. Generally, teachers discover that such a classroom setting allows them to do whatever may need to be done at a given moment, and that they come to know children better both as students and as persons from interacting more closely with them.

Although the task of planning, organizing, and arranging a classroom in which learning centers are to be extensively used raises a host of logistical questions, teachers will find that there are many useful resources available. Moffett and Wagner's (1976) text is especially useful, as is Smith, Goodman and Meredith (1976) and Thomas (1975). Reeke and Laffey's (1977 a, b) texts are also useful sources of ideas for centers.

But while evaluation the various organizational patterns, management plans, and instructional materials, the teacher must remember that all of these aspects are means, and not ends. Learning centers and classrooms set up to use them must be focused on operationalizing the concept of language development through experience-based, functional language use. If they are so focused, they will effectively emphasize what is really basic in language arts education - child language and experience.

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